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**Special Analysis****USSR:****Death of Defense Minister Ustinov**

**The death of Defense Minister Dmitry Ustinov creates a major political vacuum in the Politburo. Ustinov was the Politburo's most influential military policymaker as well as a man with unrivaled qualifications for reconciling the competing demands of defense and the civilian economy and for managing party-military relations. Choosing his replacement will be the most important personnel decision Soviet leaders have faced since the death of Andropov. The composition of the funeral commission suggests that Soviet Party secretary Romanov (the commission chairman), Deputy Premier Smirnov, and First Deputy Defense Minister Sokolov are best placed to succeed Ustinov.**

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Ustinov was a stabilizing force in Kremlin politics, and his death is a loss for leaders of various political stripes and generations. His departure denies General Secretary Chernenko the support of a man who had used his influence and prestige to strengthen the General Secretary's authority. It deprives Foreign Minister Gromyko, whom numerous observers have paired with Ustinov as the leading forces for continuity in Soviet foreign and security policy, of an influential ally. It also may adversely affect party secretary Gorbachev, whom Ustinov appeared tacitly to have backed as Chernenko's eventual successor.

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The broader political impact of Ustinov's passing is more difficult to assess. The death of yet another full member of the Politburo—the fifth since early 1982—may impress the survivors with the urgency of rejuvenating their ranks. Alternatively, it might lead the Politburo elders to join forces again to prevent the passing of power to younger leaders. Septuagenarians still enjoy a 6-to-5 majority in the Politburo.

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**Impact on Policy and Policymaking**

Ustinov's death also removes a longtime member of the Defense Council and one of the architects of the Soviet military buildup and arms control policies of the 1970s. During Brezhnev's final months in office and again before falling ill this autumn, Ustinov had publicly supported the party chief's apparent efforts to assure the Soviet military that these policies were sufficient to cope with the US strategic challenge.

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**Civilian Contenders**

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**Grigoriy Romanov**

Age 61 . . . Politburo member since 1976, Soviet party secretary since 1983 . . . one of only three "senior secretaries" along with Chernenko and Gorbachev . . . responsible for party oversight of defense production . . . ambitious and authoritarian . . . highly successful from 1970-83 as head of party in the Leningrad region, where many defense industry plants are located.

**Leonid Smirnov**

Age 68 . . . chairman, Military-Industrial Commission and deputy chairman, Council of Ministers, since 1963 . . . coordinates Soviet defense research, development, and production . . . engineer . . . worked closely with Ustinov, and these two men are generally credited with responsibility for Soviet strategic buildup since the mid-1960s.

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**Military Contenders****Sergey Akhromeyev**

Age 61 . . . replaced Ogarkov as chief of the General Staff and first deputy minister of defense last September . . . strong background as staff officer, including 10 years on General Staff . . . appeared close to Ustinov . . . demonstrated knowledge of arms control issues.

**Sergey Sokolov**

Age 72 . . . most senior of three first deputy ministers of defense, having held position since 1967 . . . exact duties unclear, but probably in charge of general operation of Defense Ministry, and may also be responsible for training, rear services, and Soviet military aid . . . played key role in early stages of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, and occasionally travels there to inspect and advise troops.

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Ustinov's death probably will have little if any effect on Soviet policy deliberations for the talks next month between Secretary Shultz and Gromyko.

[the leadership's decision to renew arms discussions with the US almost certainly was made without his participation.]

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Down the road, however, his absence will be felt. None of his likely successors can readily perform the policy leadership role he exercised. The vacuum left by his death probably will complicate decisionmaking and lead to more political maneuvering in the Politburo.

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At a time of economic stringency and heightened competition for resources, the Soviet leadership will miss Ustinov's unique qualifications to reconcile the demands of defense and the civilian economy and to manage party-military relations. Before moving to the Defense Ministry in 1976, he had headed the Commissariat for Armaments in World War II and various successor ministries, chaired the Military Industrial Commission and the now defunct USSR Supreme National Economic Council, and served as the Central Committee secretary for defense industry.

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As Defense Minister, Ustinov brought these varied experiences to bear, presiding over a continuing military buildup while implementing measures to rationalize weapons production and improve command and control. He also served effectively, perhaps uniquely, as both a champion of the military and a watchdog for the party.

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### Choosing a Successor

The central decision facing the Politburo in replacing Ustinov is whether to choose a civilian or a professional military officer. There are powerful arguments in favor of selecting another civilian who is sensitive, as Ustinov was, to the political, diplomatic, and economic dimensions of issues affecting military policy and priorities, as well as to the military's combat requirements. In view of indications over the last several years of some dissatisfaction within the military over the direction of Soviet policy, some Politburo members may believe it would be especially desirable at this time to have a civilian minister of defense in order to ensure the party's continued firm control of the military hierarchy.

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At the same time, civilian leaders know that selecting a replacement who is strongly opposed by the military establishment could aggravate party-military tensions. They consequently will be wary of ignoring the military's preferences in making their choice.

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**Romanov**

Of the present senior leadership, the clear choice would appear to be Grigory Romanov, the party secretary responsible for overseeing the military and defense industries. His appointment as chairman of the funeral commission is a strong indication that he is a leading civilian contender. Ustinov, for example, headed the funeral commission for his predecessor, Marshal Grechko. [redacted]

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Romanov is familiar with military-economic issues by virtue of his education and background as a naval engineer and his experience as party boss in Leningrad—a major defense industrial center—as well as his current assignment. [redacted]

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Romanov, however, has a reputation for arrogant and erratic behavior that both party and military leaders might view as dangerous traits in a defense minister. He served in the military only during World War II. Moving from the Secretariat to the Defense Ministry, moreover, probably would reduce his chances of succeeding Chernenko and deprive the General Secretary of a counterweight to Gorbachev. Both Romanov and Chernenko, therefore, might prefer that another man be chosen. [redacted]

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**Smirnov**

Deputy Premier Leonid Smirnov, Ustinov's successor as chairman of the Military Industrial Commission and a longtime defense industry expert, might be regarded as an alternative civilian candidate. He too is a member of the funeral commission. His long experience—second only to Ustinov's—in overseeing defense production is an advantage for him. He has worked closely with military leaders for years and reportedly has good relations with them. [redacted]

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In the absence of a civilian candidate who is clearly acceptable to both the civilian and military hierarchies, the Politburo may turn to a professional military man. In 1967 the Politburo dropped its preferred candidate for defense minister, Ustinov, and accepted Marshal Grechko rather than force the issue over the opposition of the military. Grechko's personal career ties to Brezhnev undoubtedly made this decision easier. [redacted]

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**Sokolov**

First Deputy Defense Minister Sergey Sokolov's designation as Ustinov's stand-in since late October, his rise in military protocol

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rankings, and his presence on the commission indicate that his promotion prospects are better than those of the other military contenders. While he has been a first deputy longer than any of his military rivals, his public profile has been lower. [redacted]

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He lacks the reputation for brilliance of Ogarkov or the image of a hard-driving commander associated with Kulikov. Nevertheless, he more than any other military leader has been involved extensively in overseeing and directing Soviet military activity in Afghanistan, a role that suggests confidence in his ability. The Kremlin's gerontocracy may feel more comfortable working with Sokolov than with younger, more dynamic officers. [redacted]

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### **Other Possibilities**

General Staff Chief Sergey Akhromeyev, also a First Deputy Minister, is another possible military successor. The absence of former General Staff Chief Ogarkov, Ground Forces Commander Petrov, and Warsaw Pact Commander Kulikov from the funeral commission strongly suggests that they are out of consideration to succeed Ustinov. [redacted]

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The inclusion on the funeral commission of KGB chief Chebrikov is unusual and suggests there may be a remote possibility he will be named minister of defense. Such a move would have major political implications. Party control over the military is exercised in part through the KGB, and the military has historically distrusted any increase in the KGB's power. The military hierarchy would strongly resent Chebrikov's appointment, and the Politburo would not impose him on the military unless it saw a clear need to subordinate the military more firmly to political authority. [redacted]

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### **Outlook**

Whoever replaces Ustinov, the designation of a successor will affect the political balance in the Soviet leadership. If Romanov is named, this will create a vacant leadership position that will have to be filled. If an outsider is chosen, he will become a likely candidate for Politburo membership. [redacted]

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The choice is thus significant for Chernenko as well as for his would-be heirs. Although Ustinov's long illness has given the other leaders an opportunity and reason to have decided upon his successor already, the need now to choose or to reaffirm a contingency choice could generate considerable political conflict within the leadership. [redacted]

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